December 31, 2000, 7:30 p.m.
Ecumenical Service
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

FATHER ROBERT MCLAUGHLIN
HOLY NAME CATHEDRAL

John 17: 6-9, 20 (NRSV)

British actor Sir Alec Guiness, who died last August, was a convert to Catholicism—by the way, I wish we'd stop using that word "convert" to indicate a move from Protestant to Roman Catholic, or from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism, and use the word accurately, to indicate a move from something else—or from nothing to Christianity. In any event, Alec Guiness became a Roman Catholic and used to say that, along with the music of Haydn, Catholicism kept him sane. Whenever the subject of why he became a Catholic came up, Guiness used to tell a story. He was taking a break one evening during the filming of *The Detective* in France in which he played a priest. He was strolling down the street in his priest's cassock and a little boy he had never seen before sidled up to him and silently took his hand. They walked along in silence, Guiness afraid to speak for fear of frightening the boy with his strange English tones, until the boy got to where he wanted to go and ran off. All Guiness would say was that the event got his attention by suggesting that there was something sacred and lasting about the Catholic Church. (Martin E. Marty, December, 2000)

Now—that story has absolutely nothing to do with the rest of what I have to say this evening, but I found it this week and thought it was too good not to use: and if I was a Catholic, Father McLaughlin, I'd use that story a lot. So in case you hadn't heard it, which you probably have, you owe me one!

On second thought, that little story is important for Protestants to hear, with its implicit suggestion that we Protestants need you Catholics. We're only about 500 years old, after all. And, if I may presume, the story at least allows me to presume that you need us, too; that neither of us, contrary to what we have said about each other historically and sometimes recently, neither of us possesses exclusive truth, or the exclusive right to call ourselves The Church.

It is important for us to be together this evening as either the second or first year of the Third Christian Millennium begins. It is important that among the many messages available to the holiday throngs on Michigan Avenue—one of them announced that Catholics and Protestants are beginning whatever it is we are ushering in this evening, together, in worship—something my Scotch-Irish forebears—and your Irish forebears, Bob, probably could not have imagined.

In a recent two-day consultation between representatives of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the Vatican, our Moderator, Syngman Rhee, a North Korean refugee who saw his Presbyterian father executed because of his Christian faith, made a stunning statement. The Twentieth Century, he said, was the most violently divisive century in all of human history. And standing there in front of us, he himself was a visible sign of that violence and division. But, he said, the 21st century could be a time of reunion and reconciliation and restoration and just perhaps a basic component part of that hope—that blessed hope for peace and restoration and reunion—might begin between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

Dare we, tonight, hope and dream that boldly?

I believe the answer to that question is that we must. I believe we are under a mandate—our Lord could not have been more clear. In his prayer for his disciples—and for all who "will believe because of their word"—that's you and me, by the way, the ones who are privileged to share an apostolic faith because we have the same history, the same family genealogy—Jesus prays for us and this is what he prays for—"that they may all be one . . .so that the world may believe."

So this is not about what someone characterized as "feel-good ecumenism;" you tell your story and I'll tell mine and we'll all live happily ever after together. In fact, some times those stories themselves are the fuel we use to keep the fires of disunity and division and sometimes even violence, going. No, this unity is an order we have received from our Lord—for evangelical reasons—"so that the world might believe."

It is, I would submit, a prophetic mandate. We live in an increasingly pluralistic culture. The mainline Protestant, WASP hegemony is gone. We are never again going to be a Protestant culture, or a Catholic culture, and in order to help us live into a future with neighbors whose faith claims and commitments are to other religions, we are having to learn how to stop thinking of it as a Christian culture.

And in that brave new world, what divides Christians from one another just isn't all that important, and what unites us—our common beliefs, our common commitments, our common passionate commitment to follow our one Lord Jesus Christ—is all important.

During those Presbyterian/Roman Catholic conversations last month—which will resume in Rome in March, Edward Cardinal Cassidy, President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity, urged us to think boldly and to take risks for the sake of our unity. He referred to the gospel story when Jesus appears on the Sea of Galilee and orders his disciples to let down their nets. The Cardinal did a little instantaneous exegesis which was quite good and observed that the disciples knew very well there were no fish down there. They were professionals—they were experienced fishermen. He was just a carpenter. What did he know about fishing? "Put down your nets," he commanded. He did not say, "Let's catch some fish," just "lower the nets and see what happens." And that, Cardinal Cassidy suggested, is the divine imperative before us—as we seek to find the unity in Christ that has already been given to us.
"Lower your nets and see what happens!"

When he was pressed a bit about what actually we could do, he made a suggestion that so fascinated me, I haven't been able to forget it. "Let's write history together," he said. "Let's bring Catholic and Reformed historians together to produce a history of the 16th Century.

Now, wouldn't that be something? History is always written from a point of view. Luther's and Calvin's movements are either heroic affirmations based on the word of God, or they are sinful disruptions of the unity of the church, resulting in centuries of conflict, persecution and bloodshed, depending on who is telling the story. Your saints are rascals in our history books and our saints are your heretics. Our histories tell the story of the Council of Trent and the Counter-Reformation very differently from the way you tell the story. And frankly, we can't recognize Lutheranism and Calvinism the way you describe them. What a brilliant suggestion—put the historians in a room and lock the door and say "don't come out until you've produced a common history."

We share so much that is basic. We live and will live in the future together, in this world, this nation, this city, this very neighborhood. We will be faithful or unfaithful—together. And together, we have just celebrated our fundamental belief—that in a humble birth in Bethlehem, the Eternal Word of God become flesh, and that in him was light—the light of the world.

It was one of your best thinkers, Henri Nouwen, who said it eloquently, "People who have come to know the joy of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be more than the darkness itself."

And one of ours—author and Presbyterian minister, Frederick Buechner, "The darkness is different now because he keeps being born into it."

There is a story around here which says that beautifully.

In the John Timothy Stone Chapel, named for the minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church when this building was constructed, there is a lamp, a Sanctuary Lamp, newly cleaned and lighted, illuminated by a candle, hanging from the ceiling. Now you don't see those things in Protestant churches much. There are a few—but not many in Presbyterian churches—which, if truth were told, used to think that all candles were Romish.

In any event, we have one and this is how we got it.

During World War II, Stone Chapel was open for daily prayer. One of the regulars was an elderly woman who lived across the street in the apartment building which used to stand where the Bloomingdales and Four Seasons building is today. The woman's son was in the Armed Forces, serving overseas. She was a Roman Catholic, but found it difficult to get over to Holy Name each day to pray for her son, so she came across the street to Stone Chapel. She liked the chapel a lot, but thought it lacked something—wanted it to be a little more "Catholic." So—the story goes—one day a lamp arrived at the church office with instructions that it was for the John Timothy Stone Chapel. The minister at the time, Harrison Ray Anderson, accepted the gift and had it installed. Candles for the lamp appeared annually in the church office until 1957—when the woman apparently died. We don't know her name, nor her son's name.

But we know that she knew something very important: that there is a unity which is given to us in Jesus Christ, and for which he calls us to work and study and serve and sometimes struggle together, and that far more important than what divides us is our common faith in our one Lord Jesus Christ, and our passionate commitment to follow him—the one who was born in Bethlehem—and in whose birth the Word became flesh—in whom was life and the life was the light of the world

Thanks be to God.